

Snowplow operators in northeastern Minnesota begin strike over benefits

Anthony Bertolt
18 January 2020

Earlier this week, snowplow drivers in St. Louis County in Minnesota went on strike against the institution of a third tier of equipment operators with fewer benefits.

Equipment operators began picketing on Wednesday at a Public Works facility in Pike Lake. There were also pickets from the same local, Teamsters Local 320, in the towns of Ely, Hibbing, Virginia, and Cook. The 168 drivers represented by this contract serve a rural area covering about 3,300 miles of roads.

The strike has affected local delivery and postal services, due to continued snowfall through the week. The county has dispatched 35 replacement drivers to plow roads.

One of the main issues is the new proposed rate of sick leave accrual and how much can be paid back upon retirement for newer Public Works employees. Currently, any Public Works employees hired before 2013 can be paid for up to 1,900 hours of sick leave. This amounts to 11 months of sick leave for which they can be reimbursed. For newer workers, the cap is at 1,150 hours, which amounts to a little more than six months of pay. The workers represented by Teamsters local 320 are striking to bring the cap up to 1,500 hours. The county has refused to grant the increase.

Nine other bargaining units in northeastern Minnesota, which had already agreed to the cap of 1,500 hours back in 2012-2013, remain at work. This poses the danger that the strike by Public Works employees in St. Louis County will be isolated by the Teamsters union.

Additionally, the senior cap of 1,900 reimbursed hours of sick leave effectively creates a tiered system, blocking out newer workers from the benefits of senior equipment operators. Agreeing to a lower cap was a deliberate strategy of the county governments, with the

collaboration of the Teamsters.

Picketers include new and senior workers alike, and on Wednesday, workers explained to local news that they were fighting for the newer generation of equipment operators.

Cheryl Edium, a senior equipment operator with over 20 years of experience told local news, "I want these younger people to get what they deserve, what we have," she said. "We're in this together."

The county has offered a starting wage increase of 4 percent and the offer for the Teamsters to find another self-funded health insurance plan instead of the county's offered plan through Blue Cross Blue Shield, both as a trade for the loss of sick payouts, a move that chief negotiator of the Teamsters local has called "generous."

Workers themselves have stated otherwise. Dan Wallgren, a heavy equipment mechanic told local news "The wage increases are low, (and) what you're paying out of your check keeps going up and up and up." He continued "In three years they've raised our out-of-pocket insurance cost by 38 percent. (So) this is not only for the younger people. This is also for the people who have been here way before 2013."

The county has argued that the strike reopens what had already been a settled issue with the sick payout cap. But workers are going on the offensive to stop the concerted decline in benefits and living conditions for all the Public Works employees in the county and in northeastern Minnesota.

Tom Ostman, a senior equipment operator told local news, "My whole takeaway is they're lowering us 150 or 200 hours of sick leave and it just seems like they're trying to knock it down and down every year ... They keep taking things away from us, and pretty soon it's going to be gone."



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